CHAPTER IV

THE BRAHMINICAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION:

(1) The legacy of the past:

The tradition of the Brahminical system of education continued in the medieval Assam as a legacy of the ancient period. The Ahoms who came to Assam with an alien culture and tradition in the beginning of middle ages became the master of Assam and dominated the whole of the middle age as rulers, but they did not seek to impose their own language, culture and tradition upon the subjects, rather they themselves adopted the religion, language and literature of the subject people, and became patrons of the Brahminical system of education. In the sweeping tide of aryанизation the Brahminical system of education played the pivotal role because it was the excellence of classical learning and texts, and their wealth of knowledge that made Ahoms give up their own culture and tradition and embrace Hinduism. The Brahminical system of education thus sustained not only the already existing Hindus but also the new converts and thus upheld the ancient culture.

The Nidhanpur copperplates mention that Mahendravarman, the forefather of Bhaskarnavarman was a wise man possessing atma-vidya (spiritual Knowledge) and that his son Narayanavarman was a great scholar.¹ The Guwahati grant (v. II) praises

Purandarpal with the epithet sukavi. King Ratnapala, was the chief of vedic scholars and the vedas had their aims fulfilled to him. The Puspabhadra grant of Dharmapala mentions a Brahmin conversant in Sruti, Smrti, Mimansa and Canakya. The Khonamukhi grant of the Kamrup ruler of the 11th century A.D. states that the king made a gift of land to a Brahmin from Madhyadesa. Savapala of the 12th century A.D. made a much the same grant to Prahasa, a Brahmin from Pundra or North Bengal.

The ancient Assam was famous for scholarship. Scholars from Kamrup were honoured by the coexisting rulers of India.

2. (a)Sharma, M.M., Inscriptions of Ancient Assam, pp. 50 ff.
   (b)J.A.S.B., LXVII, I, pp.99 f.
   (b)J.A.R.S, VIII, pp. 113 f.
   Silimpur grant, V 22 as quoted by Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p. 384.
During the period of Salastambhas, 'Abhinavagupta', a Buddhist scholar of the 8th century A.D. lived in Kamrup and it was perhaps due to the reputation of Kamrup that Sankaracharyya came to engage with him religious discussion.¹

Many lovers of education and culture went to Nabadwip and Banaras for studies. Scholars and learned persons under the patronage of the king of this country visited and afterward permanently settled in this land and worked for the diffusion of Indian culture.²

Assam in general adopted Hindu culture without being acquainted to a type of education which may be transmitted generation by generation in an informal way. Dr. S.K. Bhuyan described this type of education as 'illiterate literacy'.³ The inscriptions of the 11th century show 'Tracjyotishpura' as a centre of learning. It is adorned by learned men, religious preceptors and poets.⁴

1. Aiyar,C.N.K., Sri Sankaracharya - His life and Times, Madras, p.56.
3. (a) Bhuyan, S.K., Assamese literature, ancient and modern, p.2.
   (b) - A note on Assamese Manuscripts - preface Descriptive catalogue of Assamese Manuscripts.
Varnasrama Dharma and Gurukulasrama were the bases of this Brahminical system and it is worthwhile to discuss different aspects of the system in this context.

III) Varnasrama Dharma:

According to the Varnasrama Dharma, the Brahmins were expected to acquire knowledge and impart it to the society, the Kshatriyas were to work for the defence of the country, the Vaisyas were meant for trades and cultivation while the Sudras were to help others in their work, and in the beginning this decision was based on duties i.e. doctrine of Karma in the Vedic age, but in later age it came to be based on birth which was also later on guided by traditions and hereditary quality.

In fact, the most outstanding characteristic of ancient Indian society was the Varnasrama system and the four stages (Asrama) into which the ancient Hindu Law books divide the social life of men. Most of the Kings of Kamrup are seen to take special attention to preserve the customary divisions of society. These are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras.

In the rock and copperplate inscriptions they are many times referred to as the defender of the Varnasrama Dharma, upholder of the responsibilities of all traditional divisions or classes.¹

As illustrated in the inscriptions of the time, after all, the four stages (Asramas) into which man's term of life itself classified accommodated the style of life. According to Manu, the first stage of Man's life is Brahmacharya in which the student studies in the Guru's home. The student, after he has finished his studies, in the second part of his life, he marries and becomes a house-holder (grihastha). Thereafter, he discharges his obligation to his forefathers by begetting sons and to the gods by performing sacrifices. The student when sees that his hair is turning grey and that there are crumples on his health he takes turn to the forests and becomes a V-napras-thin. After spending the third part of his life in the forest, the student spends the rest of his life as a Yati or Sannvasin.² This system was an ideal and it is doubtful if even it was noticed in this land.

1. (a) Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, p.311.  
(b) Barua, B.K., CHA, p.115.
2. Manu, IV, I, V, 169 ; VI,1-2,  
33.
Indeed among the ancient classical authors, there have been found many views with reference to the four Asramas. Authors like Gautama\(^1\) and Baudhayana\(^2\) told that there is really one asrama, viz., that of the house-holder (Brahmacharya being introductory to it) and the other asramas are lesser to that of the house-holder. The drift of most of the classical books and Dharmasastras seems to dignify the prestige of the house-holder and to push into the background the two asramas of Vanaprastha and Yati. In certain cases it is reiterated that these are prohibited in the Kali age.\(^3\) In this regard, we have definite evidence that it was accustomed for the Brahmins of ancient Kamrup to enter upon the life of a house-holder after going their probation period. There is perpetual proof of the abandonment of kings, who encircled a life or relinquishment.\(^4\)

It should be mentioned that varna which means colour, had by this time lost its actual meaning and gradually merged with jati or caste. Accordingly the system laid impressiveness on birth and inheritance. Subsequently the original

\(^{1}\) Manu, III, I, 35.

\(^{2}\) - II, 6, 29.


\(^{4}\) Choudhury, P.C., HCPA p. 311.
classes of the people into four varnas had been enlarged by the improvement of arts, crafts and professions.¹ A number of factors such as heredity, marriage relation, religion, economic pursuits etc., contributed to the growth of a large number of groups and subgroups.² But unfortunately, the epigraphs of the time tell us very little about social institution except in a few cases.

(III) Gurukulasrama :-

The Gurukulasrama was the cornerstone of the Brahminical system of education. In ancient Assam education was carried on according to the direction of the varnasrama Dharma, and the education was imparted orally in Gurugrihas and hermitages.³ For the maintenance of the Brahmins, Sanskrit schools and Village schools, i.e., the 'Agraharas' were created, and the Brahmins who were sustained with 'Agraharas' maintained schools or 'Chatrasalas' for the diffusion of Sanskrit learning and culture.⁴ Generally speaking the gurus were Brahmins,

¹ Risley, H.H., Tribes and Castes of Bengal, I, Calcutta, p. XV ff.
² Choudhury, P.C., HCFA, p.310.
but there were exceptions to the rule and there were instances of non-Brahmin Gurus. The admission of the pupils to Guru grihas was guided by rules: the disciples had to work for their preceptors instead of paying tuition fees, and starting their educational career in childhood, they were required to remain with their gurus till the completion of Brahmacharyya.¹

The Gurukula system continued in full vigour in the Ahom Age, and it also enjoyed royal patronage because of the aryisation of the Ahoms. However, under the changed conditions of middle ages, the venues of the Gurukulasrama were extended to temples, dwelling houses of the aristocratic people and subsequently to shaded places.

(IV) Aims of Education:-

The aims of the Brahminic system of education were development of religious outlook, spiritual development, acquisition of knowledge, character-building, development of personality, development of social element, development of capacity to earn livelihood.²

1. Altekar, A.S. Education in Ancient India - p.266.
The development of religious outlook is the most important aim of the Brahminic education. In fact, during the Brahminical Age education and religion were inseparable. The leaders of religion were educationists. Indian literature bears the mark of religion since time immemorial. The next important aim is spiritual development. The aim of spiritualism is to know the absolute. According to the Upanishads, the theory is that the mind seeking external knowledge contracts and is contaminated and transformed by matter and communicates this contamination to the soul. Acquisition of knowledge is another important aim of education under the Brahminical system. Knowledge seems to be the motto of the Brahminical system, "The students would not depend on books only, but they used to get practical experience of the subject by travelling in different parts of the country."  

The Brahminical system laid great emphasis on character building. According to the Manusmriti, a man of character with little knowledge of vedas is to be considered better than those highly learned men who fail to lead a pious life, and as

2. Ibid, p. 29.
such, the preceptors of Gurukula set the examples of pious and ideal persons before their disciples.\textsuperscript{1} Closely allied to this aim, was the aim of development and the spreading of Indian culture which was another aim of the Brahminical system, and the Brahmins were entrusted with this responsibility.\textsuperscript{2} The system also aimed at making individuals useful members of society, and it did not ignore the aim of developing the capacity to earn livelihood. S.V. Venkatesvara rightly points out that the common objective of education was utilitarian rather than cultural, as in the case of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia, Indian education had also much more in common with that of the Hebrews. It was next door to the Persian where also dharma and truth were the social ideals. It resembled the Chinese in that it saw education in every art - the main point of contrast with the Greek was in the relative importance given to art and religion.\textsuperscript{3}

With all the achievements of the Hindus in different branches of learning and in the spread of literacy, there has always been an underlying current of religious feeling and a firm faith in traditional structure.\textsuperscript{4} This faith in the past

\textsuperscript{1} Rai, B.C., Theory of Education, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{2} Ibid, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{3} Venkatesvara, S.V., Indian Culture through the Ages, London, 1932, pp. 305 f.
\textsuperscript{4} Alteker A.S., Education in Ancient India, pp. 225 f.
"made the Hindu scholars narrow, bigoted and conceited". In other words, the "system which made great contribution to the science of grammar and philosophy and other subjects became in course of time stereotyped and formal, unable to meet the need of a progressive civilization. ¹

In fact, individual achievements, social service, and a preparation for the appreciation of the higher ends in life were the main aims of education in ancient times.² The importance on the moral and spiritual aspects of life greatly shaped the type of education and subjects for studies and it was, therefore, primarily spiritual in character.

(V) Formal Agency of Education.:-

Since ancient times teaching was imparted orally in the Gurugrihas, hermitages and forests rather than in towns.³ However, schools and universities grew with the passage of time and these along with monasteries became the agencies of education

1. Das S.K., Educational System of the Ancient India, pp. 225 f.
2. Ibid pp. 18-23.
3. Altekar, Education in Ancient India, p.73 f, 105 f, for separate centres.
The most prevalent agency of formal education was the Sanskrit Tola. Of course, the temples and places of discussion near sites of sacrificial ceremonies, clubs etc. also served the purpose of agencies of informal education. In these places the wandering scholars and the local pundits used to give discourses on various subjects; and, in fact there is evidence of existence of schools as early as the 5th century B.C.¹

In India the spread of Buddhism paved the way for the growth of elementary schools, but in Assam we have no such evidence of schools in the ancient period. The epigraphs and literature supply us with definite information regarding the existence of gurugrihas, Sanskrit Tolas and village schools which were created and patronised by kings for maintenance of the Brahmins.² The diffusion of learning in ancient Assam took place mainly due to royal patronage of the men of literature and Brahminical culture, and those who were endowed with the agnabhas maintained village schools, and they were keen in discharging their sixfold duties, one of which was teaching.³

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2. Altekar, A.S., Education in Ancient India, pp. 50 f.

In the medieval Assam the Tolas continued to play the vital role in diffusion of learning as the principal agency of education. The Tolas are natural outcome of Gurukul asrama since education of the disciples was the main objective. These were in reality residential schools, and it was originally meant for education of the Brahmin boys. The medium of instruction was Sanskrit and the subjects taught were Dharma sastras, a system of philosophy and studies connected with priestly functions. Generally speaking pupils with a thirst for acquisition of knowledge joined the Tolas. Of course, there were teachers who averted pupils. As such there was no dearth of pupils. The atmosphere of the Tolas was characterised by serenity and solemnity; and in this calm and holy temple like atmosphere the gurus gave lessons to the disciples who were to uphold the purity of religion to the future generation and carry forward the great classical tradition to the coming generation.

Like modern schools, there was no fixed time-table in the Tolas. The disciples studied different subjects. However the curriculum consisted of grammar and stories of Sanskrit.

text; and other common subjects, like arithmetic and geography were entirely omitted.\footnote{1} But the fact remains that the standard of education was of a high standard. As, H.K. Barpujadi, in a paper, "A short History of Higher Education in Assam" has pointed out that Sanskrit was the vehicle of thought and expressions and lessons were imparted in various branches of learning such as grammar, astronomy, law, poetry, philosophy (vedanta, sankhva and veda etc.)\footnote{2}

By the sixteenth century the Tolas began to grow up in such places as Bardowa, Banduka, Shri Hati, Vyasa Kuchi, Hajo, Ratnapura etc; and because of this spread of edutaion in Sanskrit the doors of Classical education were generally opened to non-Brahmins.\footnote{3} Of course, even before that the non-Brahmins were also admitted to the Tolas. Sankaradева was educated at a Tola maintained by the Brahmin Guru Mahendra Kandali, and this bears ample testimony to the fact that the doors of the Tolas in medieval Assam were not closed to non-Brahmins.

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1. A.S.Cooch Bihar Commissioners office file, 1868-73, No.100,17 Sept,1868, Deputy Inspector of Lower Assam, to the Inspector of Schools North East Division.


   b)Chatterji, PAHCI, pp.73-75.
(VI) Informal Agency of Education:–

The next important agency of the Brahminical system of education was the medieval temples where the people used to gather in large numbers during festivals and religious ceremonies. The priests and religious leaders used to explain the principles and philosophy of Hinduism on special occasions. Moreover, the recitation of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas and their expositions were frequently held for the pleasure of the devotees. The festivals took various forms such as music, dancing, recitation, play and phantomime. The temples thus played a significant role in popular education.¹

(VII) Royal Patronage:–

Royal patronage of classical learning gave impetus to the spread of education in medieval Assam. It is true the Ahom kings finally adopted the Assamese, but they thought that the study of Sanskrit was indispensable for the growth and development of the vernacular.² The Ahom kings were mainly instrumental

1. Altekar, Education in Ancient India, pp. 38 ff.
2. Sarma, S.N. (ed)'Rupakatrayam' Introduction. pp. 0.3–0.16, Preface by M. Neog, pp. 0.1–0.2.
in establishing the Tolas in various places in Assam.¹

Rudra Singha (1696-1714) was a great patron of Sanskrit learning. He sent Brahmin boys to Navadvip, Kashi, (Banaras) for learning Sanskrit. It may be mentioned that Lakshmi Singha got his education in Sanskrit under the pundit Pamananda Bhattacharyya.² There are references to royal interest in Sanskrit literature in various inscriptions.

In the Guwahati grant of Indrapala as stated earlier his father Purandarpala is described as su-kavi.³ King Dharmapala was also a poet of considerable merit. It is said in the epigraph that in his speech "resided Bhagavati and Sarasvati and he was regarded as Kavi Chakravala Udamani, chief of the circle of poets."⁴ He is said to have composed the first eight verses of Puspabhadra grant. The anthology of Sanskrit Karnamrita contains the verses by one named Dharmapala, who according to N.N. Das Gupta is none but the king Dharmapala of Kamrup.⁵

1. Chatterji, PAHCI, pp. 73-75.
4. V.8 The Puspabhadra Grant of Dharmapala, KS, p. 222.
(VIII) Study of Sanskrit Literature:

Ancient Indian literature comprises of the vedas, vedantas, upanishads, besides sarjavidya, pisachavidya, Raksasavidya, Asuravidya, Itihasa, Puranas etc., including all vocational training, arts and crafts; and the vedic learning meant mastery over Siksha Chhanda, Vyakarana, Nirukta, Jyotisa and Kalpa and included the study of the self and God.¹ In Assam, the local epigraphs mention the study of vidya and kala; vidya includes the four vedas, four upa-vedas consisting of the Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, Gandharvaveda and the Tantras, the six vedangas; Itihasa, Puranas, Smrtis, Arthasastra, Kamasstra, Silpasstra, Alankara kavya, etc.; Inscriptions also mention the study of the Vedas. The Tezpur grant mentions that Bhijjata studied the Yajurveda with all its accessories. The Bargaon grant refers to Devadatta who was the chief of the vedic scholars and he could fulfil the aims of the Vedas. In the Puspabhadra grant, there is the reference to a Brahmin well-versed in Sruti, Smrti, Mimansa and Canakya. Indoka, likewise the donee of the Tezpur grant was well-versed in the Vedas.² Ramadeva of Sravasti, the grandfather of the

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donee of the Subhankara pataka grant was chief among the Brahmins who were well-versed in the Vedas. His son Bharata was skilled in all the six karmas enjoined for Brahmins. Not to speak of the Brahmins, even some of the rulers, as given in the records were noted for the knowledge of the Vedas and various sastras. Even Sankaradeva, a Sudra, as stated in his biography, studied the four Vedas, fourteen sastras, eighteen puranas, eighteen Bharatas, fourteen vyakaranas, amara chanakya and yoga sastra.

Even though the Ahom kings finally accepted Assamese, they did not give up their encouragement for Sanskrit learning. They considered education in Sanskrit imperative to the growth and development of Assamese language and culture. They had established the Tolas and Sanskrit pundits were settled with endowments of land. To teach the Sanskrit language, schools were set up at different places. As already stated, from the sixteenth century, Sanskrit schools existed at places like Bardowa, Banduka, Srihati, Hajo, Ratnapur etc. on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. Among the subjects taught were the four Vedas, the

fourteen sastras, the eighteen purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the sixteen vyākaranas, the eighteen kavyas, the eighteen kosas and Arthasastra, in addition to Yoga-sastra and texts on Kaithili or Mathematics.  

King Rudra Singha had 'Bhaswati' (Jyotish sastra) translated from Sanskrit to Assamese by Kaviraj Chakravarty for education of the princes. Scholar like Ramashandra Barpatra could translate Yogini Tantra into Assamese because he had enough Sanskrit knowledge. However the higher learning in Sanskrit was mainly imparted to highly educated Hindus more particularly the Brahmins.  

The literary activity of the age further becomes clear from the highly dialectal and poetic prasastiś of the epigraphs. Numerous of these prasastiś may be systematized among the best specimens of the literature of the time. The different metres used in them are handled with utmost care. From a study of these prasastic, it appears that their composers were well conversant with the classical kavya style. This is evidenced by their acceptance of many verses from the work of Kalidasa.

1. Chatterji, S.K., PAHCI, pp.73-75.
The Kalika Puran is a remarkable literary work of the period. In the main though the Kalika Puran is of the nature of a ritualistic manual prescribing various rites and procedure of worship, it also gives valuable information regarding the religious condition prevailing in medieval Assam. The other notable works of the time Yogine Tantra and Haragauri Samvada are no doubt later compilations, but they preserve many earlier traditions and as such they are worthy of mention as important semi-historical texts.

2. a) Kalika Puran is a compilation of Kamrup, I.H..Q.Vol., X-XIII, No.4, p.322.
   b) Choudhury, P.C., HCFA, p.373.